

# Educating Christian Citizens Where to Start?

James W. Skillen

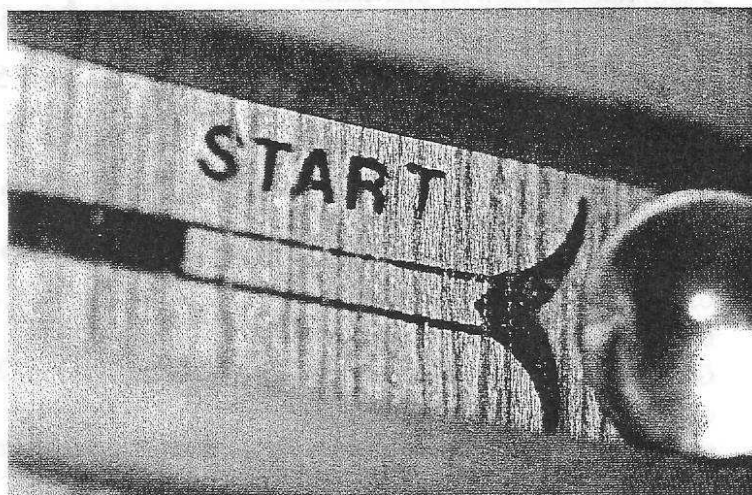
Government exists by the grace of God. Christianity does not exist by the grace of government. The implications of these simple affirmations are profound for the teaching of civics.

Teaching citizenship, at least in Christian schools in the United States, often begins with the founding of our nation, the U.S. Constitution, the country's unique leadership in establishing religious freedom, and the reasons why Christians should support such a republic and be good citizens. Along with focusing on George Washington, we then emphasize why Christianity, or "religion," is the best basis on which to nurture citizens so that they can be morally strong enough to sustain self-government.

The problem with this starting point, however, is that it makes the republic and self-government the central actors in the story and relegates Christianity to the role of a supporting actor. Let's take a closer look.

According to our Christian confession, Christ is Lord! He is the only one who may claim, with legitimacy, that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Him (Matthew 28:18). He is the one who explains to Pilate that he, Pilate, would have no authority if it were not given to him by God (John 19:11). When the early Christians were told to bow before Caesar as lord, many would not do so because they understood that Christ alone is Lord. That is the starting point for Christian citizenship—a willingness to be citizens, but only on the basis of recognizing Jesus Christ as the supreme authority over Caesar. Caesar's authority exists by the grace of God. Christianity does not exist by the grace of Caesar.

By the time of the founding of our country, there was a great deal of political confusion because of countless compromises that Christians made in relation to a variety of types of government. One wing of the church had de-



cidated to accept the role of Caesar—or emperor—as the chief mediator between God and human society as long as the emperor was a Christian. But this slighted Christ's mediational kingship and channeled all human relationships with God through the emperor.

Another wing of the church venerated the bishop of Rome as the chief vicar of Christ in this world, and political authority was recognized as legitimate only if the king or prince or governor accepted the higher spiritual authority of Rome from which his authority was delegated. When the Roman Catholic Church's authority was challenged during the Reformation, many Protestants turned to doctrines of the divine right of kings as the ground for political authority. The king had to establish the church in order for it to be considered legitimate. Political and ecclesiastical authority had become so wrapped up together that the accountability of political authority to God was obscured and constantly in dispute.

There were two major reactions to this confusion, which had led to decades of religious wars in sixteenth-century Europe. One reaction was to try to separate church and state while finding a different way to ground the state's authority in God. For the most part, that attempt went

nowhere. The second reaction, which eventually became dominant in the West, was to separate church and state by treating the state as a wholly “secular” enterprise. In other words, only the church would henceforth be “religious,” or connected directly to God. The state would be an entirely human venture in self-government. The United States, for example, derived political authority wholly from human sovereignty.

Religious freedom was established as a constitutional right for individuals. Private religious freedom now existed by the grace of the secular state. Government was understood to be free of any direct relation to God and religion.

But, you might say, that doesn’t sound like the whole story about the United States because Christians and many other U.S. citizens recognized God’s providence in the Declaration of Independence, instituted Bible reading in schools, and eventually placed the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Isn’t the United States a Christian nation after all?

This is the juncture at which the importance of subtleties and careful distinctions arises for teachers of history, civics, and social studies. Yes, many U.S. citizens believe in God’s special providential attachment to the United States. They have conceived of the United States as God’s new Israel, as God’s chosen nation. But these unbiblical theologies of the republic misuse and corrupt the biblical story of Israel and the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. After the coming of Christ, according to the New Testament, God’s true Israel is the people of God in Christ throughout the world, not a particular state that chooses to call itself God’s chosen nation.

What the U.S. Constitution and civil religion established is that Christian citizens are free in their hearts, homes, churches, and private schools to profess that Christ is Lord of all. But when it comes to the actual practice of public citizenship, they should act on the basis of purely human sovereignty. Christianity should play an entirely supporting role by helping to shape the moral conscience of individuals who imagine that they create government and hold it accountable to themselves alone. “Nature’s God” may be the author of unalienable rights for individ-

uals, but only those individuals establish and hold government accountable.

Follow me just a little further now—into your Christian school. How is it that you go about your work as a Christian educator in a Christian school today? With respect to the political and civic dimensions of the curricula, it is all too easy to convey to students a misunderstanding of

**It is all too easy to convey to students a misunderstanding of Christianity as a private, “sectarian” religion—something on the fringes of public society.**

Christianity as a private, “sectarian” religion—something on the fringes of public society. We do this even as we teach them to confess that Christ is Lord of all. Why do we do this? Return with me to the story of the United States.

In early nineteenth-century, most U.S. citizens were white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). These ancestors of ours are the ones who established what they called “nonsectarian” public school systems to keep at bay the rapidly increasing Catholic immigrants who wanted equal treatment for their schools. The WASPs called the Catholics “sectarians,” implying that Catholics were not fully in tune with the way of life in the United States. The WASPs made sure that public funds did not go to Catholic schools. Today, more than 150 years later, all religious schools (not just Catholic parochial schools) are treated as “sectarian” in the United States. Today’s government-run schools alone are presumed to represent the publicly legitimate, “nonsectarian” center of the nation’s gravity. Other schools are allowed to exist, but only on the fringes and only if they fund themselves privately. They do not have equal public standing.

Insofar as we accept this designation and treatment of our Christian schools, we thereby perpetuate a sectarian understanding of Christianity, a religion that is legitimate only when practiced in private. And by accepting that understanding, we convey to our students that Christian schools exist by the grace of government and on the fringes of society, as private sectarian enclaves, not as fully legitimate participants in public life. Christ gets reduced to our private Lord, not the Lord of all creation. In civics classes, regardless of what we might say about Romans 13 and no matter how much we emphasize the value of religious freedom, we essentially tell our students a modernistic, humanistic story about progress in this world progress away from the dark ages of religious bigotry

and persecution into the light of secularized self-sufficiency and self-government. Our thankfulness is then redirected from God to the republic. Christianity becomes for us a protected private function in the grander and more encompassing way of life in our country.

Instead of that story, we should be telling the biblical story, with big doses of self-criticism and calls for repentance. Our starting point should be “Christ is Lord of all!” All governments, including our government, exist by the grace of God. The Christian way of life is not a private, sectarian way of worship and schooling, but a public discipleship encompassing all areas of life. The ways in which Christians compromised with Roman imperialism and divine-right-of-kings ideologies in the past were mistakes that led to pretension, self-aggrandizement, and lording it over others. An open society, with equal legal treatment of people of all faiths, is more in keeping with God’s rain and sunshine on the just and unjust alike.

## The just public treatment of citizens requires equal treatment of the ways they choose to educate their children and carry out their vocations.

Yet, this kind of open political community that provides no special legal privileges to Christians depends on the grace of God through the patient, long-suffering lordship of Christ. And the government of this kind of society should acknowledge the full public legitimacy of *Christian citizens* along with all other citizens. Christian schools should not be treated as parochial and sectarian on the fringe of society. There ought to be equal public treatment for and equal funding of all students. Parents of whatever religious convictions should be free to choose the schools their children attend, with access to the same public funding and the same public respect that are given to children who attend government-operated schools.

Christianity and other religions are ways of life, not merely ways of worship. The just public treatment of citizens requires equal treatment of the ways they choose to

educate their children and carry out their vocations. This just treatment means opening the public square to all citizens—not only to those who promise to leave their faith at home or in church. With respect to education policy, what the United States needs is a new, pluralistic school system that provides equal funding and equal treatment for all students, all families, and all schools.

If you teach civics and U.S. history to your students from this point of view, they will graduate from your school knowing that something is wrong with a society in which their confession “Christ is Lord of all” is contradicted by the public treatment of their school as a sectarian fringe institution. The practice of citizenship will then lead them to work for change in the public governance of education in order to achieve equal justice for all—for Christians as well as for all other citizens—just as the Lord gives rain and sunshine on the just and unjust alike. Your students and their families will refuse to accept the dogma that their school, their church, and the confession of Christ depend on the grace of the U.S. Constitution and the way of life in the United States. Instead, they will want to become citizens whose *public* lives are fully part of their discipleship to Christ. They will want to work to make their republic more just—because of its ultimate dependence on and accountability to the grace of God through the King of kings and Lord of lords

### References

- Berman, Harold J. 1983. *Law and revolution: The formation of the Western legal tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press esp. pp. 1–45, 85–119.
- Cameron, J. M. 1966. *Images of authority*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Herrin, Judith. 1987. *The formation of Christendom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ullmann, Walter. 1965. *A history of political thought: The Middle Ages*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, esp. pp. 74–129.

James W. Skillen  
President  
Center for Public Justice